ho Decides What Students Should Learn in School ...*And How?*

Alberta

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Who Decides What Students Should Learn in School?

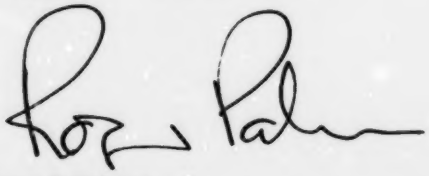
Albertans do. All Albertans play an important role in deciding what students should learn from their first days in early childhood and elementary school programs right through Grade 12....

- The Whole Community
- Classroom Teachers
- Students
- Parents
- Principals
- Superintendents
- School Trustees
- Educational Associations
- Vocational Centres, Colleges, Universities
- Government Departments
- The Minister of Education.

And How are the Decisions Made?

That's what this booklet is all about ... .
Many people in our school systems often ask us questions about student programs. They want to know how we put the programs together or what happens behind the scenes.

So we wrote this booklet to answer their questions — to show how the good ideas of classroom teachers and many other Albertans become the elementary, junior high, and senior high school programs for our students.



Roger F. Palmer
Assistant Deputy Minister
Student Programs and Evaluation Division
Alberta Education

Why Do We Develop Programs?

We develop programs so that we can give all of our students the very best education. Through programs in English and French, we're able to give students:

an excellent education

Programs outline the knowledge, the skills, and the positive attitudes students need to build a good future for themselves, their families, and Alberta.

a responsive education

Programs confirm the dignity and the worth of all students, and set learning expectations that match the abilities, needs, and interests of students at different ages and stages of growth.

an equitable education

Programs support the right of students to the same high standards of basic education regardless of their abilities, race, religion, sex, economic situation, or place of residence in the province.

a flexible education

Programs enable school boards, schools, teachers, and parents to decide how they can best meet the needs of their students — how students will be taught, and what will be best for each student.

an accountable education

Through programs, we fulfil our responsibility and our commitment to students and to society. We ensure that students are well prepared for life in today's world and tomorrow's.

What is a Program of Studies?

A program of studies is the legal document that outlines what students are expected to learn in each elementary, junior high, and senior high school subject. For example, the junior high program of studies for mathematics outlines the math courses for students in Grades 7 to 9, and what students need to learn in each course. Here's what a program of studies contains:

a philosophy statement

- what the program is all about (for example, what math is and what students do when they study math)

a rationale

- why students should take the program and how the program helps students get ready for life beyond school

student learning expectations

- the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that students are to learn and develop as they go through the program

in secondary programs, a required part and an elective part

- the "required" learning expectations for students, and an "elective" part that teachers may use to meet the individual needs of students — to enrich students' learning or help students strengthen the required knowledge and skills.

A program of studies is very important because it clearly states what Albertans expect students to learn so they can assume responsibility for themselves, and for the future direction of society. But that's not the whole story.

What Supports a Program of Studies?

A program of studies outlines what students should learn; it's also the first of many activities necessary to ensure that students do learn. So, a program of studies is the starting point for developing a variety of support materials:

learning resources for students

- "basic" learning materials — such as textbooks, videotapes, audiocassettes, and computer software — that address all of the major learning expectations in a program of studies, and that are most important for helping students learn to the best of their abilities
- "support" learning materials that address some of the ideas in a program of studies, and that help students develop their particular interests and talents

support resources for teachers

- materials that help teachers prepare lessons and select teaching methods that are well suited to the individual needs of their students; for example, teacher resource manuals for new and revised programs of study, guides to basic textbooks, and booklets on selected topics like the development of students' thinking skills

distance learning resources

- correspondence or distance learning materials that: (a) give students in small schools and isolated areas of the province the same range of educational opportunities as students in larger schools; (b) enable all students to take a course they might not otherwise be able to fit into their timetables, or to take a course

not offered by their local school; and (c) teachers in any school may use to help students work through a course at their own pace

student evaluation materials

- provincial student achievement tests and diploma examinations that help to tell us: (a) how well students have met the learning expectations in the program of studies, and (b) if any changes should be made to the program or the way it's being offered to students
- diagnostic materials that teachers use to assess and help each student strengthen skills in reading, writing, speaking, and mathematics

orientation materials for teachers

- materials that introduce teachers to a new or revised program of studies, and help them decide how to present the program to students.

What Goes Into the Making of a Program?

Whenever we design a program, we focus on students and what students really need to learn, and we try to meet the needs and expectations of our young people and those of our society. Here are some of the things that we consider, and that guide our decisions and actions:

the goals of education

- the goals of basic education for Alberta
- the goals of early childhood services
- the goals of elementary education
- the goals of secondary education
- and the role of the elementary, junior, and senior high school

the essential learning expectations for students

- the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that are most important for students to develop in elementary, junior high, and senior high school

desirable personal characteristics

- the ethical, moral, intellectual, social and personal characteristics that schools should help students develop

the nature and needs of the learner

- the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs and abilities of students at different ages and stages of growth
- the ways in which students learn best — the different learning styles of students, their pace of learning, and their active involvement in learning
- the languages and cultures of students
- the special needs of students; for example, the needs of students who have learning disabilities or who are gifted and talented
- the continuity or links in what students are expected to learn from subject to subject, and from grade to grade

the nature and needs of our changing society

- the needs, roles and responsibilities of all the people involved in the education of students
- the nature of our society, the strength of our linguistic, cultural, and spiritual differences, and our common goals for the future

- the social, cultural, economic, technological, and political changes taking place in Alberta, Canada, and other areas of the world
- provincial, national, and global issues of today and tomorrow

the nature of knowledge in each subject area

- the major discoveries or new theories in each field of study, and the extent to which these are accepted among the experts
- the thinking skills that are the foundation of each field of study
- the links between one subject and another; for example, what social studies has in common with science, and mathematics with practical arts
- the relevance of the subject to students' learning and development

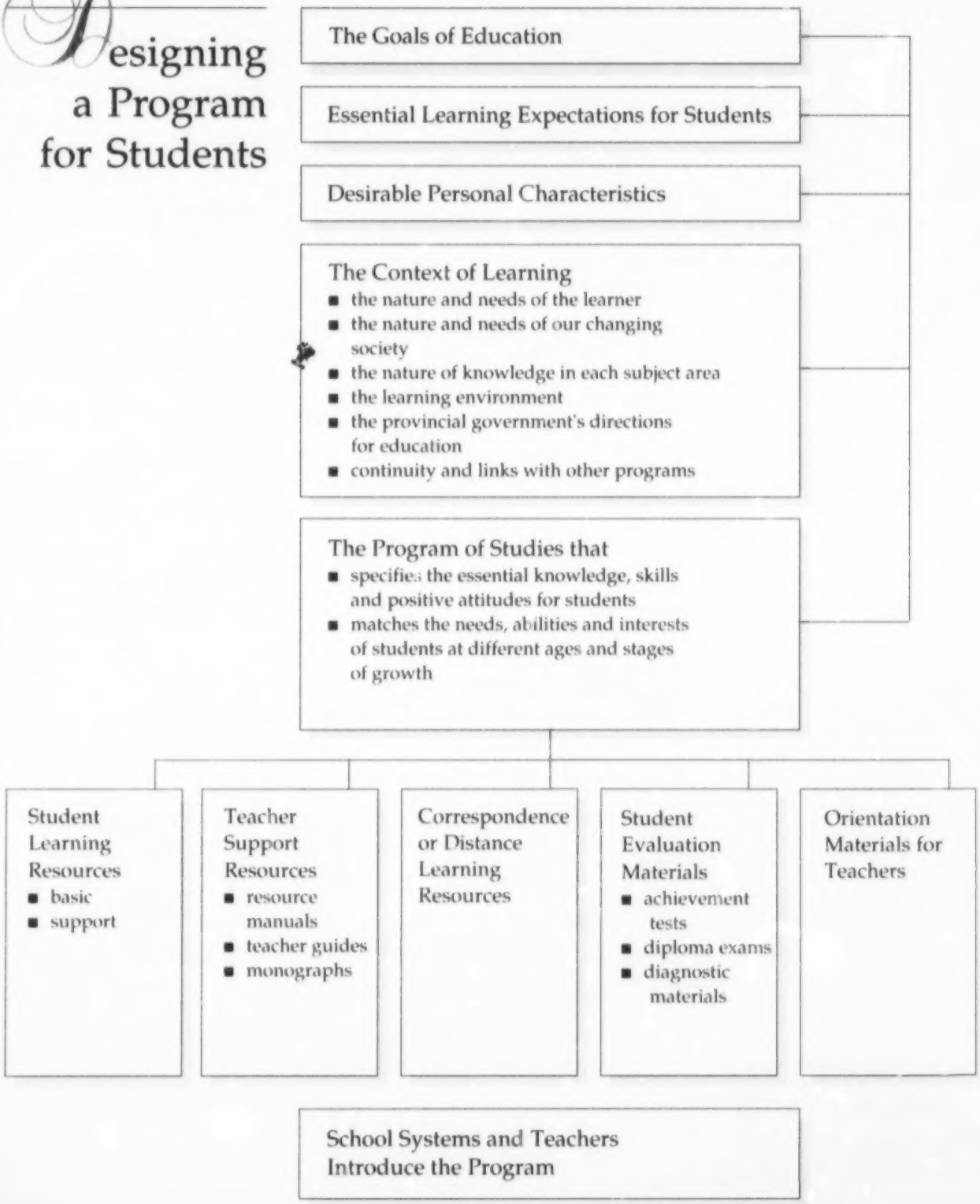
the learning environment

- the major features of the learning environment: the school, the community, the home
- the needs of teachers who guide the learning of students
- the facilities, equipment, and all of the support materials required to offer the program successfully
- the ways in which the program can best be delivered to students — the use of new technologies, and the learning experiences that can be provided by community members and agencies

the provincial government's directions for education which are based on all of the above

- School Act
- Goals of Basic Education
- Secondary Education Policy
- Language Education Policy
- ECS-Elementary Policy on Education Program Continuity
- Native Education Policy
- Controversial Issues Policy.

Designing a Program for Students


The Goals of Education
Essential Learning Expectations for Students
Desirable Personal Characteristics
The Context of Learning
the nature and needs of the learner
the nature and needs of our changing society
the nature of knowledge in each subject area
the learning environment
the provincial government's directions for education
continuity and links with other programs
The Program of Studies that
specifies the essential knowledge, skills and positive attitudes for students
matches the needs, abilities and interests of students at different ages and stages of growth
Student Learning Resources
basic
support
Teacher Support Resources
resource manuals
teacher guides
monographs
Correspondence or Distance Learning Resources
Student Evaluation Materials
achievement tests
diploma exams
diagnostic materials
Orientation Materials for Teachers
School Systems and Teachers Introduce the Program

When Do We Design Programs?

Under the direction of the Minister, we regularly review and revise all programs. We look toward the future, and we make sure that programs anticipate, keep pace with, and meet the changing needs of our students and society. This is not an easy task!

The life cycle of a program is typically eight or nine years. It takes at least three years to review, design, develop, test and introduce an excellent program in schools. Schools usually offer the program for about five years before we begin to review and revise the program again. Of course, we can't update all of the programs at the same time, so we select several programs for review each year.

Some of the major reasons for revising or developing a new program are:

- an outdated program
- new knowledge about student learning and development
- the changing needs of students and society
- new knowledge in a subject
- the need for continuity and consistency among programs
- major policy changes.

Striving for excellence, building on our good programs to make them even better, can sometimes be costly. However, we believe that it would be even more costly, both financially and socially, if we did not prepare our children to participate in and lead our society with courage, insight, and resourcefulness.

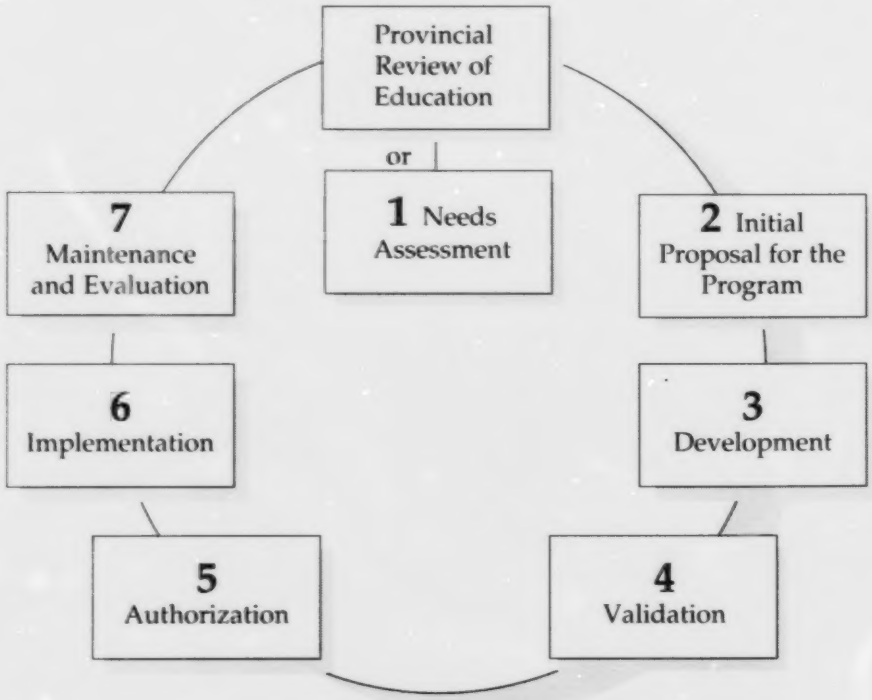
How Do We Develop Programs?

We usually go through seven stages in developing and introducing a new or revised program for our students:

- needs assessment - identifying needs and reviewing a program
- initial proposal - creating a blueprint for the new or revised program
- development - drafting the program
- validation - testing the program
- final approval - forwarding the program to the Minister for review and authorization
- implementation - making the program available to schools
- maintenance and evaluation - assessing how well the program meets the needs of students, which brings us right back to the first stage.

That sounds like a lot of work and it is. However, we don't do it alone. We set up committees with teachers, administrators, and community members to help us develop the program from stage to stage. We also invite Albertans throughout the province to review the draft program and help us make it the very best we can. Here's what the program development cycle looks like, and how it works.

The Program Development Cycle



Stage 1: Needs Assessment

At this stage, we look at the needs of our students and communities. Then we look at how well the program of studies and all of the support resources really meet these needs, and at the kinds of changes that may be required. In other words, we pinpoint the information necessary for deciding whether we should:

- keep the program just as it is
- discontinue the program
- revise the program or parts of it
- develop a new program.

Any major change to a program of studies will affect all of the materials that go with it. Therefore, when making a decision, we carefully consider whether the program of studies really needs to be changed or just some of the materials that support student learning and classroom instruction.

First, we put together a needs assessment plan that outlines:

- the reasons for reviewing a program
- the major issues and questions to be addressed about the program of studies, student learning resources, teacher support resources, distance learning materials, and student evaluation
- the methods to be used for collecting the necessary information
- the Albertans who will help us review the program
- the timelines and budget.

Then, we conduct the needs assessment. We:

- ask Albertans to help us review the program, and to help us set the directions we should take
  - teachers, students, parents, principals, superintendents, school trustees, educational associations, post-secondary institutions, government departments, and many community members and agencies
- ask teachers and parents to help us identify the needs of students
  - the needs that should be met through the program of studies and support materials we're reviewing, through other programs of study and support materials (possibly new ones), and through schooling as a whole

- ask teachers and parents to help us answer questions
  - questions that tell us how well the program of studies and all of the support materials are meeting the needs of students, and how these could be improved. For example: "Are the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes in the program of studies the most important ones for students to learn? Are there any gaps between what the program expects students to learn, and what students are actually learning and achieving? If so, why and how can we eliminate these gaps? Do the support materials help teachers prepare lessons and select approaches that meet the individual needs of their students?"
- collect further information for making decisions
  - through meetings, interviews, questionnaires
  - by reviewing the current research on student learning and development, the changes taking place in our society, and new knowledge in a subject or field of study
  - by reviewing current information about good teaching methods, and approaches that help students learn to learn
  - by looking at programs in other provinces and countries
  - by reviewing the results from student achievement tests and diploma examinations, and by listening to the ideas of the many teachers who have administered and marked the tests and exams
  - by looking at the information collected by Alberta Education consultants, by the people who regularly visit and keep in touch with what's happening in schools and classrooms.

On completion of the needs assessment, we compile a brief report that outlines our findings, the recommendations received from Albertans, and the actions we need to take. If there's a need for a new or revised program, we go on to the next stage.

Stage 2: Initial Proposal

We carefully develop an initial proposal or blueprint for the new program in keeping with the information collected and the advice received from Albertans. Then we discuss the proposal or blueprint with teachers, and develop a plan for all the work to be done.

The proposal or blueprint for the program outlines:

- why we need the new or revised program — how the program will meet the needs of students and communities
- what the new program will look like — the major changes to the program, or the main features of a new program
- what will be required to support the program; for example: learning resources for students; support resources for teachers; distance learning materials; student achievement tests or diploma examinations; school facilities; technology; and school-community partnerships
- how educational participants may be affected by the program; for example, the professional development needs of teachers
- how the program will be tested in schools and classrooms throughout the province
- how the program can best be introduced in schools
- the standards that will be used to measure how well the new program meets the needs of students
- the time lines for developing and introducing the program in schools
- the recommendations of Albertans, and the research that supports the changes or proposed directions for the program.

The plan for developing the program outlines:

- the major tasks to be accomplished
- the classroom teachers and Alberta Education staff who will be carrying out the tasks
- the time lines for each task.

Stage 3: Development

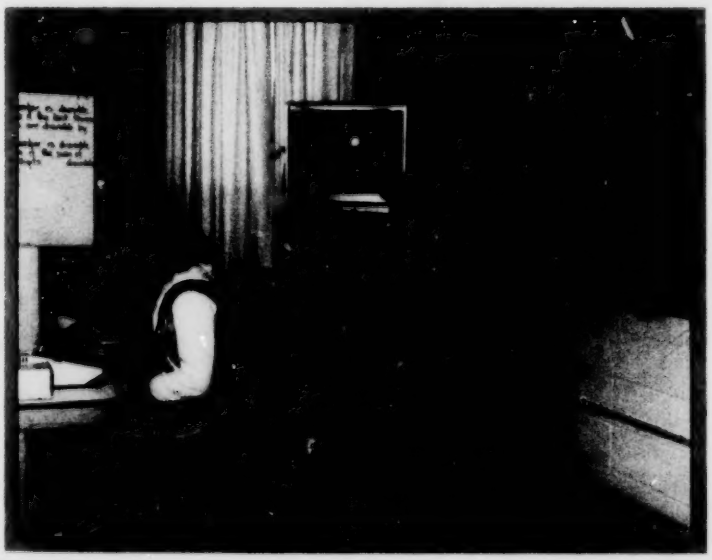
We carry out all of the activities below with help from many teachers and community members. Classroom teachers working with Alberta Education design the program of studies, and an array of support materials. Sometimes we contract with school systems and schools to develop the program or parts of it. Publishing companies and some community agencies prepare a variety of learning materials for students, and accompanying guides for teachers. Finally, members of our curriculum committees carefully review all the draft materials, make recommendations, and guide activities from one stage to another.

- Drafting the program of studies in English and French
  We now draft the program of studies — the philosophy, rationale, and student learning expectations — in keeping with the initial proposal or blueprint. Once a draft is ready, we generally hold meetings in each region of the province to gather the views and ideas of school staffs. A little later, we send the draft program to schools, to teachers and other interested Albertans for review. Then we revise the draft program of studies.
- Developing distance learning materials
  We begin to design the correspondence or distance learning materials — packages that include a set of instruction, practice, and assignment booklets which guide students' learning.
- Selecting and preparing materials for students and teachers
  We also begin to select or prepare the basic learning resources for students and the support resources for teachers.
- Preparing student evaluation materials
  We start preparing the provincial student achievement tests or diploma examinations.
- Drafting orientation materials
  We draft some of the materials that will help teachers decide how they can best offer the new program to students. We may even hold some initial information sessions for teachers so that they can, in turn, familiarize colleagues in their own schools with the proposed program.

Stage 4: Validation

Together with teachers, we screen, field test, and make final revisions to the program of studies and all of the support resources.

- Screening
  The program of studies, student learning resources, and teacher support materials are carefully screened to make sure that they:
  - clearly outline the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes students are expected to learn
  - match the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs and abilities of students
  - have a sound instructional design
  - foster tolerance, understanding, and an appreciation for all people and their contributions to our society.
- Field testing
  We field test the program of studies, learning resources, and teacher support materials in different schools throughout the province to make sure that they meet the needs of our students and communities. The length of field testing may vary from a few months to a whole school year, depending on whether the program is new, extensively revised, or simply updated. We also field test the distance learning resources and student evaluation materials.
- Making final revisions
  We carefully review the results from field testing, and make any necessary changes to the program of studies. Once revisions to the program of studies are completed, we finish our work on the student learning resources, teacher support documents, distance learning resources, and student evaluation materials.



Stage 5: Authorization

We send the program of studies to the Minister for review and final approval.

The Minister authorizes the new program for use in Alberta's schools only when satisfied that the program fully meets the needs of students and society, reflects the views and expertise of Albertans, is of the highest possible quality, and can be offered in schools throughout the province without major difficulty.

Stage 6: Implementation

We now work with classroom teachers, consultants from school systems, and the Alberta Teachers' Association to introduce the new program in schools as smoothly as possible.

- Communication
  We distribute the new program of studies, teacher support resources, and information on student learning materials to all teachers before the program is to be introduced in schools.
- Orientation and consultation
  We then hold orientation sessions for lead teachers who have been nominated by their superintendents to help introduce the new program in their schools. During these sessions, we present materials that help teachers plan and decide how they can best offer the program to their students. The lead teachers, in turn, provide similar orientation sessions for colleagues in their own school districts. Of course, teachers don't have to carry out all this work alone.

Alberta Education consultants, curriculum consultants from school systems, specialist councils of the Alberta Teachers' Association, and teachers in different schools throughout the province all work together. They set up networks and workshops to share ideas, strategies, and materials that will be helpful in offering the new program, and in meeting the individual needs of students.

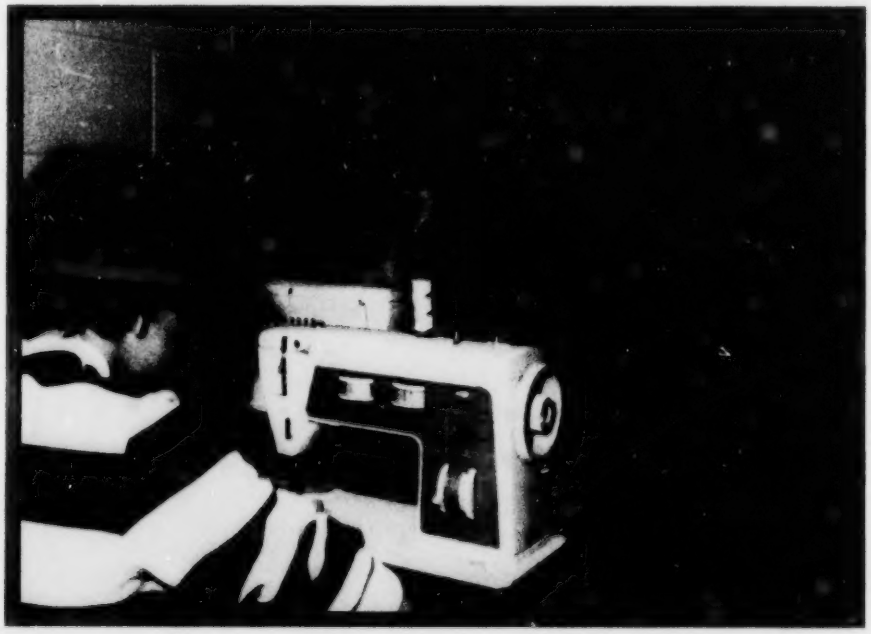
- Introduction of the program
  Schools and teachers throughout the province offer the new program for students. During this time, schools may continue to provide workshops for teachers, and Alberta Education consultants continue to help teachers with the new program of studies and support resources.

Stage 7: Maintenance and Evaluation

- Maintenance over five or six years
  We continue to look at how well the program meets the needs of students, to address any concerns that Albertans may have, and to make minor revisions, as required.

  Teachers, schools, and school districts continue to develop and share unique approaches, and innovative support resources that meet the individual needs of their students. They also help us screen and select new learning materials for students and support materials for teachers that become available on the market.

- Evaluation
  When the program has been in schools for about five or six years, we formally assess its effectiveness, efficiency, and acceptability. This takes us right back to the needs assessment stage.



How Do Albertans Help to Develop Programs?

We rely on Albertans to help us review, design, develop, test, and introduce new programs in schools. In fact, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for us to develop excellent programs without the advice and expertise of all the people who share a responsibility for educating students.

So, Albertans help us to make decisions about what students should learn in school, by:

- taking part in comprehensive reviews of programs like the secondary education review
- giving us recommendations during the needs assessment of selected programs like health, ethics, and practical arts
- participating on Program Coordinating Committees that guide our work from beginning to end
- participating on Subject Advisory Committees that help us develop the program of studies and all of the support materials
- helping to field test programs in schools
- reviewing draft programs and telling us what they think
- attending meetings, conferences or seminars with Alberta Education staff and the Minister of Education
- sending us briefs and letters, and calling us to express their views.

We sincerely thank all Albertans for their help in developing elementary, junior high, and senior high school programs. We're confident that, together, we can continue to provide all of our students with the very best education.

For More Information

We welcome your views on the education of Alberta's students. For more information about the elementary, junior high, and senior high school programs for students, please call or write:

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